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ABSTRACT

The role and importance of education for homeless children and families particularly in New York City at the Homes for the Homeless organization are considered. The educational needs and role of parents are also explored. Education is a key component in the struggle against poverty, and parents need to embrace education both to move toward greater economic security and to be able to foster their children's education. Education initiatives at Homes for the Homeless which use a family-based approach to education, are described. The programs include early childhood education in the "Jump-Start" Program, which uses a variation of the High/Scope curriculum (an educational method developed at the University of Michigan and known for its effective application with at-risk and disadvantaged children). Children in this program have shown rapid developmental, social, and emotional growth. The "Learning Fast-Track" developed for school-aged children is based on an educational model developed by Henry Levin at Stanford University. Program participants show significantly improved attendance and academic gains. The following steps toward improving the educational opportunities of homeless families are highlighted: (1) expand the availability of educational programs; (2) establish accelerated afterschool learning programs; (3) develop Healthy Living Centers; and (4) establish Learning Centers for adults. Contains 10 references. (JB)

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ED 397 140

ACCESS TO SUCCESS

Meeting the Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Families

Homelessness is not a housing issue; it is an education issue, a children's issue, and a family issue.
- R. Nunez

Vol. 1, Issue 3 January 1993

Education: An Underlying Tenet in the Struggle Against Poverty

Today in New York City, almost 6,000 families live without a home. These are young families with painful and fragmented pasts. They comprise over 10,000 children, 8,000 of whom are under the age of six. The lives of these families are dominated by a seemingly insurmountable poverty characterized by domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse, foster care, chronic health problems, and inadequate education. It is this last characterization – an inadequate education – which cripples a family's ability to survive. For both parents and children alike, only education can provide a viable exit from poverty.

Education is children's work. Their days should be dedicated to learning, with school providing the essential building blocks for the future. However, the following statistics foreshadow a grim future. When comparing New York City's homeless children to non-homeless children of similar ages[1]:

Homeless children are...

- 9 times more likely to repeat a grade;
- 4 times as likely to drop out of school;
- 3 times more likely to be placed in a special education program;
- 2 times as likely to score lower on standardized tests

...than non-homeless children.

Parents play a pivotal role in educating their children. With two-thirds of homeless parents never having graduated from high school, they must complete or continue their own education and gain the basic skills essential for independent living before they can become effective teachers for their children.

More importantly, they must embrace education in order to better promote their children's intellectual growth and academic achievement. Unfortunately, because these parents often times feel ill-equipped, they seldom assist their children with school assignments or teach them basic skills; they rarely read to their children or introduce early learning experiences in the home. Consequently, it is imperative that parents learn to value education before their children will understand its worth.

In order to address the educational needs of both children and their parents, Homes for the Homeless has instituted a family-based approach to education; one where children and their parents are seen as both students and as teachers. Our overarching goal is to teach, through example, that education needs to become a way of life, rather than merely one aspect of their lives. Through our comprehensive approach we have begun to watch the cycle of poverty slowly being replaced by the burgeoning promise of a cycle of education.

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Serving Homeless Children and Their Families

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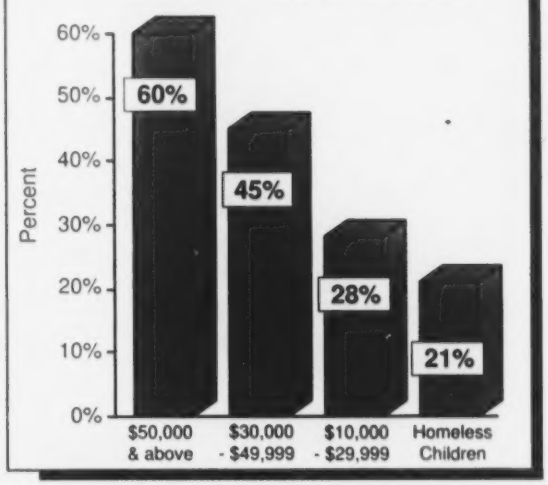
Early Childhood Education: A "Jump-Start" on the Future

Early education lays the foundation for future academic success; it encourages a child's cognitive and social development in the short-term and produces substantial long-term educational benefits.[2] Unfortunately, low income and homeless children participate in preschool at significantly lower rates than children of middle and upper income groups and therefore miss many of the benefits of early childhood education.

In a recent survey of families residing at Homes for the Homeless' facilities we found that nearly 80 percent of the school-aged children did not attend school prior to kindergarten. In contrast, 60 percent of children from upper socioeconomic groups and 45 percent of children from middle socioeconomic groups have attended, on average, at least one year of preschool prior to kindergarten (See Figure 1)[3]. Not surprisingly, this discrepancy is primarily due to the family's financial status. While Headstart (a federally financed preschool program) was designed to ensure that low-income children can attend preschool, it serves less than 20 percent of all those eligible.[4]

Figure 1: Rates of Enrollment in Preschool: by Various Family Income Levels



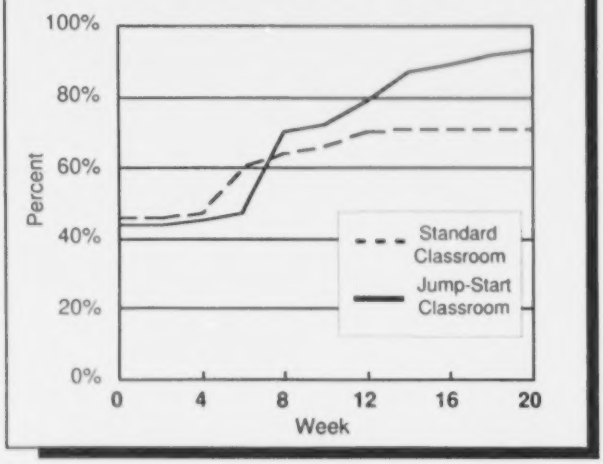
Recognizing the invaluable effects of early childhood education, Homes for the Homeless developed the Jump-start Program which serves over half of the 500 children under the age of six who live in our facilities. This program is comprised of a Child Development Center, a Literacy Program, and an Intergenerational Program at each of our four facilities.

The Child Development Centers are the crux of the Jump-start Program and serve both infant and preschool-age children. The infant care component offers children a nurturing environment where they receive stimulus for their mental and social development. Infant rooms are tailored to provide the youngest infants stimuli in the areas of sight and sound, and older infants more advanced psychomotor activities.

The Child Development Center's offer preschool-age children a "jump-start" on their education by utilizing a variation of the High/Scope curriculum, an educational method known for its effective application with at-risk or disadvantaged children. Developed at the University of Michigan, the High/Scope model is child-directed. By using the children's interests to plan their day, the activities not only accomplish their immediate goals (such as painting, participating in mock Olympics, or planting vegetables), but also foster a sense of control and initiative in the child. Incorporating motor skills activities, communication and teamwork, creativity, logic and spatial relationships in the act of doing something, enriches both their educational and social development.

Although participation in preschool leads to lower drop out rates, teenage pregnancy, criminal behavior and welfare dependency, homeless children participate in these programs significantly less than children of other socioeconomic groups.[5]

Figure 2: Developmental Gains of Homeless Children in Standard vs. Jump-Start CDC Program



Homeless preschoolers manifest a number of developmental lags, as revealed by standardized tests. However, in just weeks the children at HFH show marked improvements in the areas of gross and fine motor, language comprehension and social skills. Children participating in the Jump-start program exhibit even greater gains than those children participating in standard daycare.

Over time we have found that most homeless parents often lack a support network from which to get accurate information, or to voice their own pride, fears, or reflections about their child's development. Therefore, parents have been integrated into the Child Development Center's infant and preschool activities to teach them about the development process from infancy through the toddler stages, and provide them with ideas for activities to engage in with their children. The Child Development staff targets parents so that they learn that the Centers are more than simply drop-off services, but rather places where their children can truly learn and develop through simple activities they themselves can encourage within the home.

The Jump-start Child Development Centers have had an enormous impact on the homeless children who participate when compared to conventional childcare methods (See Figure 2). Children show rapid developmental, social and emotional growth in as little as eight weeks. Their language skills improve dramatically, their attention spans lengthen, they exhibit more cooperative behavior, they develop self-confidence and they become more spirited and alert. They also experience growth spurts and weight gain.

The Literacy and Intergenerational components of the Jump-start Program complement the CDC's well. The Literacy Program encourages parents and their children – whether they are participating in a CDC or not – to join in activities such as group storybook readings, trips to local libraries, workshops on how to read to their child, or visits to the quiet reading corners in the CDC's which are stacked with books donated by the Reading is Fundamental Foundation (RIF). The Intergenerational Program works in conjunction with local senior citizen centers to sponsor workshops on puppetry, clay-molding, and paper maché. These activities allow child to interact with older adults who provide them with an overabundance of attention and care. In addition, the parents reap the benefits of elderly role models who share their experiences on parenting and working with children.

For homeless children, who spend roughly 9 to 12 months of their young lives without a permanent home, the Jump-start Program provides educational and creative outlets, allows them to develop bonding relationships and nurtures their natural capacity for initiative, curiosity and independence. In all, the Jump-start Program successfully sparks an interest in learning which will help to ensure the future educational achievement of homeless children.

Accelerated Education: The Learning Fast-Track

School-age children require a supportive and nurturing environment to ensure their academic success. However, homeless children – who often live in a shelter environment for an entire academic year – rarely receive such encouragement due to frequent moves, unstable living conditions and often abusive or neglectful situations. These conditions adversely affect their school attendance and academic performance.

We have found that during the 1991-92 school year nearly 40 percent of all school-age children entering our facilities had attended at least two different schools; 27 percent attended three different schools and 13 percent had attended at least four different schools. These same children were absent from school an average of three weeks during the previous year. Worse yet, 20 percent of the school-aged children missed at least six weeks of school.

The impact of this instability has been reflected in their academic performance: 24 percent of the school-aged children living in our facilities have been placed in special education classes due to developmental delays, and 37 percent have repeated a grade (See Figure3). More disturbing, only 23 percent of the children were found to score at grade level in math and only 38 percent scored at grade level in reading. These devastating indicators predict an educational quagmire and future of continued poverty for a generation of homeless children if not aggressively confronted.

The negative impact of homelessness take its toll on the academic achievement of children. Nearly nine times as many homeless children in NYC had repeated a grade and three and a half times as many were placed in a special education class during the 1991-92 school year as compared to NYC students as a whole .

Faced with this challenge, Homes for the Homeless developed the Brownstone School to compensate for the disparity in educational opportunities available to homeless children ages 5 to 13. This accelerated afterschool program is based on the premise that children who are behind academically should not be placed in a "slow lane" or a remedial program to catch up, but rather into the "fast lane" or in an accelerated program. With guidance from the educational model developed by Henry Levin at Stanford University, the Brownstone School emphasizes a low student-to-teacher ratio with a high degree of individualization according to the needs of each child.[7] The model stresses the teaching of concepts, analysis and problem-solving, rather than repetition and drills. It instills and strengthens the fundamental educational building blocks of reading and writing, science and mathematics.

An evaluation of the Brownstone School showed marked improvements in the academic performance and school attendance of the students who participated in the program. A review of the academic gains of the program revealed extraordinary results in as little as six months. The children's scoring potential in reading rose by 50 percent, from less than 40 percent to 60 percent, while their scoring potential in math more than doubled, from 23 percent to roughly 50 percent (See Figure 4).

Figure 3: The Educational Status of Homeless Children vs. Non-Homeless Children

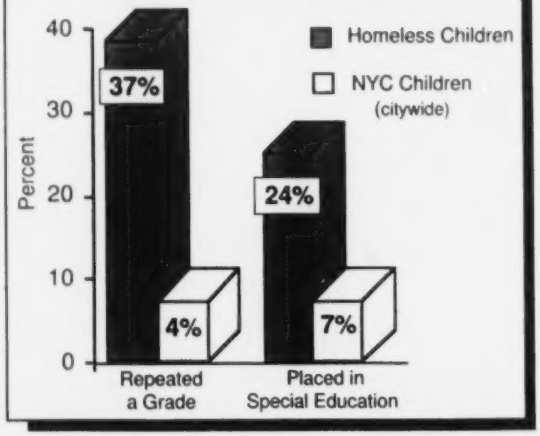
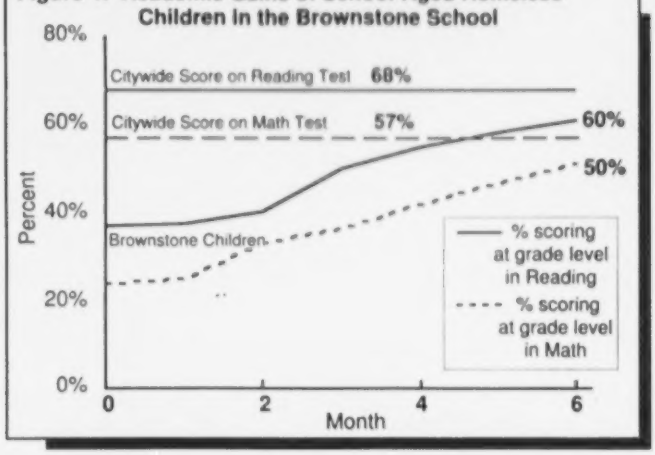


Figure 4: Academic Gains of School-Aged Homeless Children in the Brownstone School



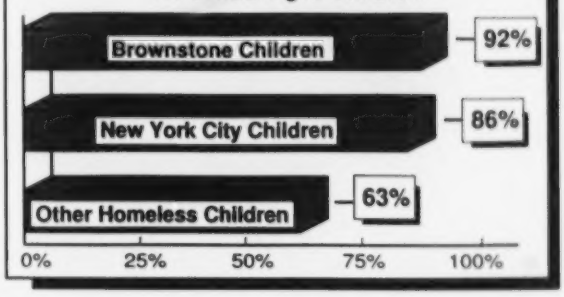
When homeless children learn in an accelerated environment they show remarkable gains in as little as 6 months. Children increase their scores in math and reading comprehension nearly two-fold, as the percent reading at grade level increased from 39% to 60% and the percent comprehending math at grade level increased from 23% to 50% respectively.[5]

Furthermore, the Brownstone School has made a positive impact on school attendance. The public school attendance among Brownstone School students is almost 30 percent higher than the citywide attendance rate for homeless children, standing at roughly 92 percent and 63 percent respectively (See Figure 5)[8]. School attendance is also higher for Brownstone School students when compared to the systemwide average of 86 percent for all children in New York City. Another interesting comparison showed that 60 percent of the absences for Homes for the Homeless' school-age children not participating in the Brownstone School were considered unexcused, while only 35 percent of the absences of Brownstone students were considered unexcused or unrelated to illness. Clearly the Brownstone School's accelerated curriculum has captured the enthusiasm and energy these children exude, and has positively channeled it to achieve an educational end.

Studies have shown that high rates of absenteeism, particularly among low-income students, predicts subsequent dropping out.[6] *As a result, HFH closely monitors the school attendance of all its students. Children who participated in the Brownstone School were shown to have higher rates of school attendance compared to other homeless children and NYC students systemwide.*

Through its innovative teaching techniques, educational programs, field work, computer learning applications, and bonding with the Brownstone teachers, the children develop stronger learning ability, greater self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment. In addition, the Brownstone School encourages parents to become directly involved in their child's education by sponsoring family activities such as literacy workshops, group field trips, and projects such as a community garden and mother-teen workshops. The Brownstone staff also facilitates greater collaboration between the parents and the child's public school by encouraging parents to attend teacher conferences and to use their child's teacher as a source of advice and guidance. This has proven successful as we found that an astounding 86 percent of Brownstone parents visit their children's school often while only 26 percent of parents whose children do not participate in the Brownstone School report that they do the same. These partnerships will motivate parents to continue communication with the child's teachers in later years.

Figure 5: Comparative Daily Attendance Rates for School-Aged Children



Kids Just Want to Have Fun: Building on Hidden Talents

Extra-curricular activities are essential to round out a child's educational and social development. Unfortunately, homeless children are often consumed by the anxiety and confusion they feel about what has happened to their family. They miss their old neighborhoods and friends, and sometimes feel unwelcome or uncomfortable in a new school where they are often taunted for being homeless.

Homes for the Homeless has created Healthy Living Centers as a place solely for the use of children. These Centers serve as the hubs of creative and recreational activities and offer homeless children an outlet in which to expresstheir feelings. They serve as an alternative to the destructive or violent behavior to which so many of today's poor children fall victim.

Theatre, art, dance and poetry allow children to express typical adolescent feelings, as well as those about poverty and homelessness, not otherwise articulated. Sports teams and theater troupes encourage cooperation and teach socialization skills. Workshops and rap groups on substance abuse, AIDS, pregnancy and crime help children develop coping and decision-making skills to handle such issues. In addition, special outings to the coveted Madison Square Garden or Shea Stadium, as well as the occasional Broadway productions add a flare of excitement and competition for children who participate in the Center's more educational activities. Children, however, must attend school everyday in order to participate in any of the Center's many varied activities.

In sum, the Healthy Living Centers are the vehicles through which children can develop untapped skills, improve their self-esteem and confidence, cultivate role models and friendships, and round out their school-based educational experiences.

Parents: The Vanguards of Education

Homes for the Homeless' educational programs for children have acted as a magnet for parents. As these young parents—whose average age is 22—watch their children blossom and thrive through their involvement in either the Jumpstart Program, the Brownstone School, or the Healthy Living Centers, they become inspired to get more actively involved in their children's educational development. This involvement often takes the form of volunteering for the program their child attends. However, many parents have also chosen to complete their own education. Over 60 percent of the parents without a high school diploma and whose children were attending the Brownstone School, were currently working toward obtaining their General Equivalency Diploma (GED). The overwhelming reason given by parents for doing so was to "set a good example for my children."

To support the educational needs of parents and to promote learning as a shared family activity, HFH developed on-site Adult Learning Centers which house the Alternative High Schools and serve as the hub for all adult education activities. At the Alternative High Schools, licensed teachers help students ages 14-21 who have dropped out of school complete their education and prepare for their GED exam. The Centers are also equipped with computers and educational programs that tutor parents in math, reading and writing. The Learning Centers also work with the Child Development Centers to sponsor reading and literacy activities for parents and children.

The Learning Centers harness the interest and curiosity parents experience when they become involved in their children's education. While the Center does have the immediate effect of helping parents complete their own education, prepare for the GED exam, and even help some parents prepare for college or job training, a more long-lasting effect is the example this education sets for children. By promoting the education of parents, the Learning Centers also ensure the continued education of children.

Can We Make a Difference?

As an entire generation of homeless children grows up without a focus on education, society not only fails to cultivate a future for these children left behind, but also promotes a continued cycle of poverty. Early intervention in their educational lives, along with on-going academic support ensures that children will have every opportunity to succeed. Implementing an effective strategy which is family-based, child-centered, and education-focused as a method for working with homeless families is feasible and necessary. The components of such a model are:

- ***To expand the availability of educational programs.*** The Jump-start Program complete with its Child Development Center, Literacy Program, and Intergenerational Program serve as an excellent foundation for the educational and social development of homeless children. Parental involvement in these activities further encourages and insures education as a way of a life for homeless families.
- ***To establish accelerated afterschool learning programs.*** The Brownstone School is a model for helping children not performing well in school, or at risk of repeating a grade or dropping out, to improve their academic performance and potential through an accelerated rather than remedial approach to learning. Again, parental involvement is key to ensuring a child feels encouraged and supported to achieve beyond remedial expectations.
- ***To develop Healthy Living Centers.*** Extracurricular activities not only round-out a child's education, but also helps to improve their socialization skills and self-esteem. Healthy Living Centers encourage children to attend school and succeed, as well as develop a coping mechanism to deal with the pressures of being an adolescent in a volatile urban environment.
- ***To establish Learning Centers for adults.*** Adult education is a crucial component in fostering learning as a family activity. Parents must complete their own education if they are to have the skill, knowledge and self-esteem to promote their children's education, and ultimately, improve the family's socioeconomic status.

Over the last six years, Homes for the Homeless has developed an educational strategy based on its experience in working with over 6,100 families and 15,000 children. We believe that the myriad of challenges and issues we face are representative of those faced nationwide. While divisions continue to exist among advocates, service-providers, and policy-makers as to what the solution to the homeless problem is, today most would agree that the solution is not simply housing. As the majority of homeless families lack the independent skills necessary to face the challenges of urban poverty, *it is education*, rather than housing, which holds the potential to ameliorate this deplorable crisis begun in the 1980's. By prioritizing the education of society's most vulnerable children, we invest in the nation's social infrastructure. With an estimated 600,000 homeless families compromising roughly 1 million children nationwide, the magnitude of the challenge is great.[10] However, the potential of the homeless children who are inspired to adopt education as a way of life, is even greater.

How can policy-makers and service-providers work tougher to accomplish this? One option is to transform the physical infrastructure of emergency shelters built during the 1980's, into Residential Educational Training Centers (RET). The 1990's can produce a new breed of program-based facilities where families not only work to attain housing, but more importantly have access to educational programs such as the Jump-start Program, the Brownstone School, and adult education programs. These RET Centers can also efficiently provide much needed counseling, job-training, and health care services. In sum, the strategy outlined herein provides one initiative available to policy-makers, both new and old, to meet the challenge of the daunting and relentless homeless crisis afflicting poor children and their families. If we are to ever end this crisis, we must begin to creatively face its realities.

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Homes for the Homeless is the largest provider of transitional housing and services for homeless families in New York City. Since our inception in 1986, we have served over 6,100 families including over 15,000 children. Our goal is to break the cycle of poverty and ensure a future for our children.

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